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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of a multicultural preschool curriculum in Slovenia on preschool children's sensitization to cultural differences and understanding of themselves, others, and different cultures. The curriculum was implemented for a 1-month period for 6.6- to 7-year-olds. Multicultural enrichment was evident in wall decorations, toys and objects in the play areas, and books touching upon topics of multicultural education. Special activities included joint activities with children with special needs and making a poster and a collage of pictures of people from other cultures. The six children in the experimental group were videotaped during free symbolic play both prior to the program and on the last day of the program. Also, on the last day of the program, children in the experimental group and children in another class who had not been exposed to the activities (matched in sex and age to the experimental group children) were interviewed regarding the views of story characters toward a little Indian boy who was different from other Indians. Analysis of the symbolic play showed no qualitative changes in the children's use of language. The prevailing toys used were the ones representing the children's natural environment. Differences did emerge, however, in the responses of children exposed to the multicultural curriculum and those not exposed to questions about a story character. Children in the experimental group gave greater priority to being kind and compassionate than to being big and strong, whereas children in the comparison group gave greater priority to being big and strong than to being kind and compassionate. Some differences also emerged in the two groups' explanation of the concepts of diversity and equality. (KB)

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CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF MULTICULTURAL PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

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SUMMARY

The objective of the present study was to design an operational multicultural curriculum which stands on the basis of relevant principles and aims of the new national curriculum. We wanted to test whether an one-month implementation of the multicultural pre-school curriculum can help to improve pre-school children's sensation to cultural differences and if it does, in what ways. In order to explain the effects of the program, we based on the theories of developmental psychology, including the development of empathy, language and social cognition in the pre-school children.
The participants were two groups of children, aged from 6;6 to 7 years.

The results of the empirical research show that there are no qualitative changes in the use of language in children's symbolic play. The prevailing toys used in the play were the ones that represent the reality of children's natural environment. The processes of object and imaginative transformation and verbal communication after the operational curriculum do not indicate any reference to multicultural context.
The difference between the group of children, exposed to the multicultural curriculum and the group without any planned multicultural education activities was in the priority of importance between being big and strong and being kind and compassionate. Some differences between the two Groups also emerged in the explanation of the concepts of diversity and equality.

KEY WORDS: multiculturalism, multicultural education, pre-school curriculum, symbolic play with toys, social cognition, empathy, language.

INTRODUCTION

The new (1999) Slovene pre-school curriculum builds on the following principles:
(1) children perceive and understand the world holistically,
(2) they develop and learn in active relation to their social and physical environment,
(3) they develop their unique social and individual identity through interaction with peers and adults in a child care centre.

In several fields of activity, such as language, social activities and art, special emphasis is placed on multiculturalism and multicultural education. Democratisation of pre-school education stimulates children to make choices, participate in planning, discussing options and making decisions, and to share responsibilities. Through behaviour and communication norms they acquire specific experience in implementing basic human rights, they learn to live with one another as they try to find answers to the questions Who am I? and Who are the others?, they learn through social and verbal games, nursery rhymes, riddles and fairy tales.

In the child's gradually expanding learning about its immediate environment, an important role is played by early awareness of other cultures and societies (customs, traditions, holidays, etc.), which is the basis for developing mutual tolerance and respect for the different. Pre-school children must be offered opportunities to develop the feeling of being safe and belonging to a social group, founded on the idea of equality and non-discrimination (with regard to gender, social and cultural origin, religion, etc.).

What is multiculturalism and multicultural education?

Understanding self, knowing about one's home place, one's own culture and national tradition are important for the child's early encounters with other cultures and societies, for its learning and understanding in what ways people are similar and in what ways they differ. Goals of multicultural education cannot be implemented only directly, by conveying information. Rather, various approaches and techniques should be used combining knowledge (this involves understanding concepts and ideas that may be presented through observation, reading, watching films, etc.), skills (role playing and demonstrations are of particular interest here), and attitudes (these are formed through communication and interactions among children and among children and adults) (York, 1991).

The pre-school child's language and social competences are already sufficiently developed ...

There are a number of important aspects of the pre-school child's social development - social interactions, social competences, social roles, empathy – that are reflected on the levels of understanding self and others, of overcoming egocentricity and developing the concept of friendship.

Findings of a number of studies showing that even toddlers and pre-school children are capable of understanding that other persons' views, beliefs, purposes and feelings may differ from their own, may at first sight seem very ambitious. However, a closer examination of their data reveals the importance of context in a child's development and learning and the meaningfulness of problems and social conflicts to be solved by children. E.g., Miller, Kessel and Flavell (1970) describe an experiment in which little children were shown the two sides of a toy car with a picture of a cat on one side and a picture of a dog on the other. The children were asked two questions: »What do *you* see?« and »What do *I* see?«. The authors claim that even two-year-old children overcame egocentricity and solved the socio-cognitive problem by understanding that the person seeing the toy car from the opposite side than themselves could not see the same picture.

Development of social cognition, which involves a complex network of emotional, social and cognitive development, proceeds through the process of self-awareness, self-understanding and understanding others. The infant is already aware of itself. The toddler at approximately two years can express its feelings verbally. At age 3-4, the child is

capable of distinguishing between what is real and what is imagined. A 5-to-6-year-old child is guided in its description of people and selection of friends mainly by personality traits like honesty/ dishonesty or sincerity/ insincerity. And a 7-to-9-year-old frequently assigns multiple characteristics to other people and is aware or intolerance e.g. against his or her own cultural group (York, 1991).

Empathy, which can be defined as the affective and cognitive awareness of other persons' inner states - thinking, feeling, perception, and purpose -(Hofman in Overton, 1983), is closely related both to development of social cognition and to the theory of the mind. As pointed out by Papalia, Olds and Feldman (1998), children between ages 2 and 5 already discover their own beliefs (they discover they are aware of and can understand both their own cognitive processes and those of others). Borke (1971, in Ervin, 1993) claims that a 3-year-old recognizes other persons' emotional responses in simple and familiar situations. Barnet (1984, in Erwin, 1993) adds that pre-school children show more empathy with sad peers in situations comparable to those they themselves have already experienced. And according to Eisenberg and Miller (1987, in Ervin, 1993), in adolescence a link between empathy and pro-social behaviour is manifest only when adolescents are in a specific situation with specific persons, but not when they are read a particular hypothetical story.

In the context of multicultural education, a central role is played by language, which is important in shaping an individual's identity, identification with his or her culture, integration in his or her nation's tradition and in learning about and accepting other cultures and societies. Language is a cultural system. Its forms and structures have a cultural history, and its meanings are culturally embedded. They are not the property of individuals, dyads or small groups. When thinking in language emerges, culture enters the mind. Shatz (1994, in Nelson, 1996) similarly emphasizes the achievement, through language experience in the years from 2 to 3, of recognizing that »there are both differences and commonalities between self and others in using the language of mental states to express those relations« (p. 327). Experience of self and others provides only a tactic understanding the difference; language makes the difference explicit.

Use of language in various communicative situations allows the child to reach beyond the immediate experience of here and now, to surpass egocentricity, and to achieve a greater mental and social flexibility.

Taking into account the fundamental principles and aims of individual fields of activities in the pre-school curriculum, the objective of the present study was to design an operational curriculum in which multicultural education runs permeates a number of different activities. This should allow us to test various possible approaches to implementing objectives set out in the curriculum, particularly in the fields of language and social activities. We wanted to test whether a one-month implementation of the operational curriculum can help improve pre-school children's sensitization to cultural differences and their better understanding of themselves, others, and different cultures, and if it does, in what ways.

METHOD

The sample included two groups of children aged 6.6 to 7. Before the program of planned multicultural activities was started, six children (Group 1) were videotaped during free symbolic play. In their play corner, the children had various play materials at their disposal: dolls (baby dolls and others, white, black and an Indian), teddy bears, kitchen utensils, dishes and cutlery, various 'foods', prams, items of clothing and accessories (including those specific of foreign cultures), hairdressing accessories, an ironing set, picture books and photos of people from different environments.

The pre-school centre participating in the experiment (the Group 1 children were also its regular pupils) carried out a one-month program of multicultural education (described in detail below). Otherwise, in the school year 1999/2000 this pre-school centre has not yet adopted the new national curriculum, so the field of multicultural education has not been systematically included in its activities. The experimental operational multicultural education curriculum was designed on the basis of relevant principles and aims of the new national curriculum.

The operational multicultural education curriculum mainly targeted the fields of language and social activities, while some activities spanned several different fields.

Individual planned activities were accompanied by necessary adaptations of the playroom. Walls were decorated with posters and photos showing persons from different countries and cultures, their ways of life and specific characteristics. Various toys and other objects were provided in the play corner, e.g. black dolls, different foods and accessories (e.g. a typical African bracelet), and reading corners were enriched with picture books and children's encyclopaedias depicting life and culture of people in different parts of the world and differences among people.

The first set of activities mainly involved the field of language. The preschol teacher read to children three Slovene stories touching upon topics of multicultural education (*Messages and Problems of Puffy the Dog* by Polonca Kovač, *The Little Squirrel of a Special Kind* by Svetlana Makarovič, and *Jurij Miru in Africa* by Tone Pavček). The children listened to the stories, discussed their content and reproduced parts of the stories either in symbolic play, role playing or drama playing.

Within the field of social activities, which is the second major domain pertinent in multicultural education, the children visited the developmental unit of their centre, which provides care for children with special needs. They spent an afternoon with these children, playing with them, and the next day the developmental unit children came over to their playroom, and this time they drew pictures together. The emphasis was on establishing social interactions, communication and cooperation.

While involved in the first and second sets of activities, the children also made a poster and a collage. They collected photos of persons from various parts of the world and

elements of their cultures and societies. In making the poster they learnt about similarities and differences among people and ways of life in different environments.

The last day of the experimental program, Group 1 children were again videotaped during symbolic play, in a situation comparable to that at the beginning of the experiment. The teacher was instructed to read to the children a story entitled »The little Indian called the Falling Snow«, about a little Indian boy who was different from other Indians. He never caught any animal or fish, he was clumsy, slow, he never won in competitions, in other words, he lacked all those qualities that were appreciated by Indians. People kept telling him what an Indian should be like, and nobody showed any understanding for his differentness. One day the little boy happened upon a wounded horse, started taking care of it and healed it. Together they caught fish on the shore of a peaceful lake. The boy learnt to stand upright on the horse's back and keep his balance, they rode into high mountains and they started to discover the world together.

The same story was read to children in another pre-school unit, who were of the same age group as the children in Group 1 but who had not been exposed to planned multicultural education activities. Six children from this unit who matched Group 1 subjects by age and sex were selected as Group 2 in the experiment.

A partly structured interview was carried out with the children included in the two experimental groups. The questions related to the message of the story about the little Indian called the Falling Snow. They can be subdivided into three groups:

- questions related to the description of the main character (his appearance and his personality traits);
- questions related to other persons' views: what did other Indians think what an Indian should be like? How do you think the other Indians understood the little boy's differentness and how they spoke about it;
- more general questions about what properties the subjects assign to children living in different cultures and about how they understand differentness (otherness) and equality in this context.

Next, the videotapes of the children's symbolic play (two recordings of 20 minutes each) were analysed. The children's play before the multicultural program activities and after them was compared in terms of multicultural content and activities.

The children's answers in the partly structured interview were categorised according to their content. In determining the categories, development of the concepts of friendship, empathy and social cognition in childhood were also taken into consideration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

Analysis of the symbolic play in Group 1 before the multicultural education activities

Use of toys: the children (both boys and the girls) play most of the time (some of them on and off, others without any interruption) with teddy bears and white baby dolls. They feed them (either with food in the form of structured toys or imagined), take for a stroll, do their hair, dress or undress.

The children play in groups of two or three, on the level of either object transformation or imaginary transformation. In verbal communication with other children, with the imaginary person, the teddy bear or the doll they do not use words or sentences that would represent a shift towards describing and explaining differentness of people (children) from other environments. In the entire play sequence only one girl briefly plays with an Indian-looking doll. She dresses her, but makes no verbal comment. Another girl puts an African bracelet on her arm and walks around with it for a few seconds, again without any verbal comment either from herself or from the other children. Two other children transform the African bracelet into food and offer it to their dolls, but they do not say what it is.

Although at the beginning of the play session all the dolls (black and white) and teddy bears lay on the same shelf, the children ignored black dolls and consistently picked up white ones. When they were putting them back on the shelf 'to sleep', two children slightly pushed the black dolls aside, as if not wanting them to be touching the white ones.

Analysis of the symbolic play in Group 1 after the multicultural education activities

Use of toys: The children play mainly with teddy bears and dolls, dressing and undressing them, putting them to bed, taking them for a stroll. Neither the Indian doll nor the black dolls are included in their play. One of the dishes is used as a dog' bowl and the boys spend quite some time pretending to be dogs. Kinetic activities occur – jumping, pushing one another around, playing catch - that do not make part of the context of the symbolic play.

Analysis of verbal communication shows that there are no qualitative changes in the use of language when compared with the children's play at the beginning of the experiment. When specifically asked by the observers why they did not play with the black or Indian dolls, the children replied »because she can't move her legs« (the legs moved in the same way as those of white dolls), »because they have strange hair that can't be combed«, or »because the Indian doll has long hair and I don't like long hair«.

The two play sessions (before and after the multicultural education activities) do not differ in terms of content or specific activities. In both sessions the children exclusively or prevailingly use structured toys that represented the reality of their normal environment; also the processes of object transformation or imaginative transformation and verbal communication do not indicate any reference to multicultural context.

In the second play session, the children do notice that dolls are different (in appearance), but the used the differentness as the reason for not playing with those toys. It may be concluded that after the multicultural education program the children possess more information and knowledge about the fact that people and cultures are different, but they do not incorporate this information and knowledge into their cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social behaviour in play.

Answers of children in Groups 1 and 2 about the picture book "The Little Indian called the Falling Snow":

(Note: Because of the small sample, only absolute numbers of answers in individual qualitative categories are given.)

Description of the main character

Appearance:
All six children in Group 1 described the Indian boy as having black hair, a plait, brown skin, and different clothes. Some also said that he could not shoot with a bow, hunt rabbits, etc.
The children in Group 2 described him in the same way, only in less detail.

Personality traits:
Five children in Group 1 described the little Indian as a boy who felt sad, miserable, worried, while one child said he felt happy and fine.
In Group 2, all six children claimed that the Indian boy felt miserable and that he was sad.

Other person's views of the main character

When asked what the Indian boy's father and grandfather thought about what qualities an Indian should have, four children in Group 1 said he should be fast (faster than children usually are), and two said that he should be like other children.

In Group 2, five children thought that other Indians believed an Indian boy should be faster than other children, and one child said he did not know.

When asked whether other Indians had any understanding for the little boy's differentness or whether they may have made fun of him, most children in Group 1 answered that they made fun of him and did not understand him. One child claimed they understood him, but

he could not explain how they showed it. Answers in Group 2 were slightly different: three children said other people were mean and made fun of the boy, two children did not recognize the boy's distress and claimed people understood him, and one child answered he did not know.

However, both groups gave the same answer about whether the other characters in the story later on changed their attitude towards the boy, and if so, when and why. The answer was focused on a specific event, viz. the boy's help to the horse, which then in turn 'helped' the boy. When asked what they personally considered more important in human beings, either being big and strong or being kind and compassionate ('understanding others'), all the children in Group 1 opted for kindness and compassion. They said this went for all children regardless of where they lived. The same was said by four children in Group 2, while two thought it was important to be big and strong (and again regardless of where children lived).

The sentence »children differ (are different) and equal« meant to four children in Group 1 and two children in Group 2 that children differ in their appearance but that they have the same rights. One child in Group 1 thought that we were all different because each of us was born separately (he did not mention physical appearance), and two children in Group 2 believed that differentness meant equality or similarity. Three children in Group 2 claimed that all children did not have the same rights, adding that they personally for instance would not play with black children and that they live in a different way. They could not substantiate their answers, the reason was simply that those others looked different, that they were black.

The results show that the children in both groups were capable of describing the little Indian's physical appearance, his behaviour and the way he felt. The boy's feelings were described very briefly, mainly with a single word, while his physical appearance was described with several sentences. A majority of children in both groups also understood the other characters' perception of the boy and could tell what an Indian boy should be like in the views of those characters. There is a difference, however, in answers to the question about whether the other Indians understood the differentness of the little boy. Several answers in Group 2 did not make sense. There are noticeable differences between Groups 1 and 2 also in the priority of importance between being big and strong and being kind and compassionate, and in their explanation of the concepts of differentness and equality (all children having the same rights). A half of Group 2 believed that not all children had the same rights, specifying they would not play with children different from themselves because of their different physical appearance.

Similarly as in the first part of the experiment, in interpreting the children's understanding and description of the picture-book story, no generalisations can be made because of the small sample. We also cannot and should not speak about a direct influence or non-influence of the multicultural education program on changes in children's understanding and behaviour. But the theoretical premises outlined in the introduction and the qualitative analysis of children's behaviour during play and of their understanding of the book (as reflected in their answers and comments) do allow one conclusion:

multicultural education involves very diverse explicit and implicit activities which demand of the teacher a thorough knowledge of children's developmental characteristics and of various approaches and methods if an effect is to be evident also on the level of their actual understanding of other people, interpretation of differentness and attitude changes.

CONCLUSIONS

The basic principles of the pre-school curriculum, e.g. democracy and plurality, equal opportunities and respecting differences among children, multiculturalism, offering choices, to mention just a few of the principles generally accepted by educational experts and permeating all fields of activities in the new national pre-school curriculum, need to be translated into concrete educational activities on the level of an operational curriculum. Multicultural education may be incorporated into various fields of activities. However, it demands an expert and systematic approach both in looking for topics suitable for pre-school children and in choosing various approaches and methods of work. It should involve both specific fields of pre-school education like language, social activities or art, and everyday life in the pre-school centre, i.e. the so-called hidden curriculum (daily routine, communication). Our analysis shows that a relatively short operational curriculum, despite its interesting and diversified multicultural activities, is not efficient. There are at least two critical points:

(1) the time dimension: Is such a short period of time (a month or two) enough to develop a child's social competences and empathy, to help him reach a developmentally higher level social cognition, metarepresentation and metacommunication, and to change his or her attitudes? The answer is no.

(2) the quality, diversity and choice of methods: Did the activities sufficiently include situations that were simple enough and familiar to children of the selected age group? Were the situations concrete enough, did they involve concrete situations, were they sufficiently strengthened with emotions and social conflicts that children should solve themselves? Once again, the answer is no.

Considerations like this are always relevant when we want to incorporate new principles or aims into pre-school curricula. Any project of this kind demands thorough and systematic preparations and multidisciplinary work.

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